

Arts / Visual Art

# Abigail DeVille dwells in history, interpretation, and power at the former Peale Museum



'Charm City Roundhouse' by Abigail DeVille (Courtesy/The Contemporary)

By **Rebekah Kirkman** · Contact Reporter

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**I**n the middle of the large back room in the former Peale Museum, there is an old stack of brown paper or cardboard, bound with twine. The stack is smushed, water-logged, and anonymous, label-less. It's a relatively small detail; the floor is covered with stacks and spread out sheets of large, wrinkled, brown paper. Five or six chandeliers hang low from the ceiling, and to the right, an enormous, ratty, plastic recreation of the War of 1812 flag hangs from wall to wall—and it's too big for the wall, so it drags and bunches up onto the floor.

This installation, and all of Abigail DeVille's "Only When It's Dark Enough Can You See the Stars" (presented by The Contemporary), revels in the messiness of history—even this building's own documented history—mining materials and stories from this place's past.

A glimmer of that history, real quick: In 1814, the Peale Museum opened as the first museum building erected in the Western Hemisphere, and its original purpose was to be "entertaining and scholarly,

and to be used as an instrument of democracy," according to the Contemporary. The museum closed in 1829, and the next year, it became Baltimore's first City Hall. From 1878 to 1887 the building operated as "The Male and Female Colored School No. 1" (the first public secondary school for African-Americans in this city). Then it was the city's Bureau of Water Supply, and then it was a rental space for shops and factories, before it was condemned in 1928. It reopened as a museum in 1931 after more than 100 years as everything but a museum, and closed again in 1997. A non-profit group called the Peale Center for Baltimore History and Architecture is currently working to reopen it as a museum later this year.

But now, for just a few more weeks (the exhibition closes on June 11) the building houses a site-specific art installation, containing materials that point to those histories, mingling with contemporary stories and interpretations. DeVille transforms and overwhelms each room with visual and aural information, offering historical facts and narratives in theatrical pieces.

You can start wherever you like, but the room to the right as you walk in, on the first floor, is filled with slate, found photographs of Marylanders from 1870 to 1970, window panes, and mannequins semi-hidden by dark tattered curtains—a nod to the schoolchildren. The adjacent room recognizes the building's origins, with portraits of some of the men involved with opening the museum, and Charles Willson Peale's painting 'The Exhumation of the Mastodon,' and a few taxidermy animals housed in a wooden curio cabinet (a Mastodon skeleton uncovered by Charles Willson Peale, I later learned, was part of the Peale Museum's first featured exhibit). The aforementioned room with the piles of papers and the flag references the Peale's "humble beginnings and its time as City Hall." Each of these rooms are lit in specific ways, with blue and red gels or projections or colored fluorescents; or they're ordinary bulbs, but there's an excess of them, a tribute to Rembrandt Peale, who helped start the Gas Light Company of Baltimore—the progenitor to BGE.

As you wander around the museum, you can keep pulling out details like that or jot down notes and then get lost in a rabbit hole of research later, but you'll also miss or forget things because there is so much. We think of a museum, particularly a history museum, as something that offers clarity, that presents a narrative of the past to help us understand it in a specific way. But DeVille argues that clarity and concision are a farce, that history is messy, fraught, and moldable. It's impossible to catalogue or fully describe the exhibition, the materials in it and their provenance—with the exception of a few notes in the exhibition title list, we aren't told whether those mannequin parts, tarps, and chandeliers came from DeVille's New York studio or the Loading Dock in Baltimore, or the Peale Museum's basement.

One thing you could easily miss as you walk up the staircase is a series of six wheatpasted posters on the wall that briefly describe riots that have occurred in Baltimore, from the 1812 newspaper riots and the 1835 bank riots. The most recent riot included here is the 1942 March on Annapolis, when a reported 1,800 Black people marched against police brutality, after a police officer shot and killed Thomas Broadus, an African-American private in the army. The march led to the [Baltimore Police](#)

**Department** hiring the city's first Black police officers, as well as "the formation of a statewide 'Commission on Problems Affecting the Negro Population.'" This probably felt like monumental progress at the time, but it's something people shrug at today—particularly in post-uprising Baltimore, where we know that while representative leadership is important, the plentiful Black leadership in a city does not solve the problem of institutional racism.

Each of the rooms on the second floor grapple with these systemic issues, Blackness, and uprisings. Around the corner from the stairs, a room called 'Invisibility Blues' is a dream-like space full of blue light and barriers—whitewashed, wooden fences and lattices and doors—and found fragments of informational placards, from when this place was the Baltimore City Life Museum. The fragments explain more of the building's history as a segregated school for African-Americans, and depict poor housing conditions for some Baltimoreans in the early 1900s. A prompt on one of the fragments that says "Who I am determines where I live" asks leading questions about privilege like "Have I had much schooling?" and "How much do I earn?" and "What is the color of my skin?"

In the next room, a wall of televisions builds upon those questions, playing looped footage of protests from the Real News Network, Malaika Aminata's "Not About a Riot," Critical Past, and "One Document for Hope" by Margaret Rorison. In the same room, there's also an old dry cleaning rack, which holds pots and pans, wigs, bicycle tires, an ice skate, a blowdryer, rusty pipes, dolls, and various other unexplained objects on strings. Aggressively, loudly, and with a clanking and deep hum, the rack rotates around its track and then switches directions without stopping, left and right, right and left. The title of this room is taken from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1968 Mountaintop Speech: 'But somewhere I read of the freedom of assembly. Somewhere I read of the freedom of speech. Somewhere I read of the freedom of press. Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest for right.' This speech is where the exhibition's title comes from, too.

Though DeVille works hard to engage your senses of sight, touch, and sound all at once, the room titled 'Black Whole'—a very powerful, very dark, narrow passageway with two long corridors that don't seem navigable—disorients us and deprives us of our sight. Lit only by a white strobe light, we can only catch brief glimpses of these dark corridors, which contain rows upon rows of metal trash cans (500 in all, according to the exhibition title list, "to consider the voices lost to time, space and recorded history; to the histories that speak to us that are embedded in our genome; to 500 years of ancestry living in our DNA"), filled with trash and glass bottles and other objects. In all of the other rooms I feel compelled to get close and scrutinize each detail, but here, that impulse is futile. You can hear songs (composed by Justin Hicks and featuring Kenita R. Miller-Hicks and Jade Hicks) faintly in some rooms and loudly in others; in here, with your diminished sense of sight and recognition, their harmonies are intensified, their sensations and sounds just wash over you.

The songs are loudest, though, in 'The People's Theater,' a sanctuary that is mostly empty except for a set of pews, a small stage, a black, tattered tarp that covers the ceiling (with light shining through the tarp's holes), a few protest signs and photographs, and a microphone, which is always on and open to

the public. There have been scheduled "Sunday Salons" in this room every Sunday since the opening, featuring many local singers and poets and storytellers, such as Elon, Meccamorphosis, Tariq Touré, Abu the Flutemaker, Bilphena Yahwon, and others.

At the opening reception, I wormed my way through the crowd to the packed courtyard to watch Dimitri Reeves perform his best Michael Jackson. And then, upstairs in 'The People's Theater,' Joy Postell sang a few songs and got the whole crowd to clap the rhythm for her. Justin Hicks and Kenita Miller-Hicks performed their harmonious, hymn-like call-and-response, beginning downstairs and winding their way upstairs, snaking around the crowds of people, drawing in everyone to the theater who wasn't already there. These performances and the weekly salons underscore the notion that all of this—history, legacy, art—are living and breathing things.

*For more info on the Sunday Salons and other programming, visit [contemporary.org](http://contemporary.org)*

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